



S. M. LIPSET:

Social Scientist of the Smooth Society

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The facts are too common to be shocking anymore. They are well-known and Lipset cannot plead ignorance. In short, Political Man is representative of American social science because it skirts the major issues in attempting to be objective. Rather than critically evaluating what is going on and suggesting alternatives, Lipset has neglected the seedy aspects or swept them under the rug of methodology and academic gobbledy-gook in his efforts to maintain the American celebration.

Lately, in academic circles the problem of government subsidy of university research has emerged as a burning issue. It is feared by many that academic freedom will be restricted by the federal government giving money only to those who toe the line. In large part the reasons for this development have been precisely the uncritical 'value free' methods practiced by social scientists such as Lipset. The true function of social scientists, and indeed of all intellectuals, has always been clear. It is not uncritical service, but telling the truth, evaluating it, and acting like free men.

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I see a garden blooming undisturbed
Where all the buds are even in their rows
An ordered garden, sweet with unity
That is my dream; my Smooth Society

MacBird, Act II, Scene 2

Invariable, the first thing we are told in social science courses is that the good social scientist is objective. He does not let his own beliefs or prejudices obstruct the evidence. Rather, he allows the facts to 'speak for themselves'. At first glance S. M. Lipset's Political Man admirably follows this rule. Lipset's essays seem to be straightforward reports on the conclusions which his data have forced him to draw. But when one examines the book carefully, he can see that it is based upon certain assumptions that guide the presentation of the evidence. For while it is true that social scientists must be objective and seek the facts, it is also important to remember that all evidence must be presented in an ordered form. Even the greatest amount of data rests upon assumptions that must be examined if the work is to be accepted as valid and useful.

Political Man contains assumptions that are faulty if not dangerous. Faulty because they do not help describe society as it is; dangerous because they lead to distorted 'answers' to many of the problems facing America and other nations.

Unfortunately these shortcomings are not unique to the work of Lipset. The same mistaken assumptions and misuse of terms found in Political Man are typical of American social science today. As you read this, think about other books, articles, or lectures you have encountered in your college experience. The arguments of Lipset are presented in social science courses over and over again.

In the beginning, two things should be made clear. Much

empirical evidence is available to counter Lipset's data. There simply isn't space to present it in any great detail. Studies in the bibliography should be consulted for specific empirical work that contradicts Lipset. Second, only some of the major themes of Political Man are discussed here. This is not an exhaustive review of all parts of the book but an attempt to explore its underlying assumptions and the way in which they color and distort the scholarship.

DEMOCRACY AND WEALTH

In Chapter 2, 'Economic Development and Democracy', Lipset presents the widely held view that economic advancement is interrelated with democracy ('the more well to do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy'; p. 31*). He presents various indexes of national economic wealth to justify his conclusion. What is the reasoning behind this? Because 'only in a wealthy society in which relatively few citizens lived at the low level of real poverty would there be a situation in which masses of the population intelligently participate in politics and develop the self restraint necessary to avoid succumbing to the appeals of irresponsible demagogues.' (p. 31) A wealthy society typically means an industrial one with a sizable middle class and highly educated population. The poor are often prone to support extreme measures that might produce instability and threaten the very existence of democratic institutions. The middle classes are economically satisfied and better educated. They can afford to be tolerant of others and make the necessary moderate adjustments so that the system functions democratically. A wealthy society is also able to aid the poor in integrating themselves into the mainstream of the society and shedding their extremist orientation.

There are many assumptions made here, but let's examine two. Perhaps fundamental is the belief that the economic wealth of a nation determines the political attitudes. More

* All page references are to the 1963 Anchor paperback edition of Political Man.

We have reached utopia. There are no major conflicts left, only adjustments to make. The intellectuals, once critical of society, can serve a different purpose. They are the technicians of the system: those individuals that possess the skills to see the problems facing the society and suggest means by which they can be solved with the least possible change. Their task is patching up and making small modifications.

Indeed, Political Man is an example of such technical work. Lipset is interested in preserving the present order because it is good. His concern is to make the gradual adjustments, leaving fundamental issues unsolved. 'Getting by with a little help from our friends' is the motto of our political system, with the aid most enthusiastically supplied by the current crop of 'action-oriented' intellectuals like Lipset.

Typical of American social science, Lipset is content to end his work on this cheerful note. Of course, although ideology is 'over' in the West and the major problems have been solved, the battle has just begun in the underdeveloped lands. And it is here that we must turn our efforts. Although his remarks might be applicable to the Third World, a mere listing of the issues facing America should dispel some of Lipset's optimism.

The economy of the United States continually demonstrates a lack of vitality even though it remains propped up by a huge defense industry and a fairly major war. While we spend 40 billion dollars in our quest to reach the moon, we face the prospect of greater and more violent disruption in our cities. Despite highly publicized efforts, at least 20 per cent of the people in the United States remain below the poverty line. A not so small number of these are starving and suffering from malnutrition. As the federal government grows, more decisions are made by technocrats without public knowledge or control. The Selective Service System is designed to induct men in occupations not deemed essential for domestic manpower requirements. Big business holds immense private political power. Besides being morally bankrupt, our aggressive foreign policy drastically limits the already slim chance that nuclear disarmament will ever occur. In addition, we have managed to starve or kill outright people in the Third World through our irresponsible policies.

disturbing is the passive way in which Lipset discusses the non-voting figures for America. He remains unconcerned that so few people in the United States formally participate in the political process by voting. For a man dedicated to exposing the right and left wing extremists that threaten democracy, Lipset does not once suggest that perhaps the 'system' is at fault there. In short, Lipset has chosen to remain 'soft' on criticism of the status quo, refusing to evaluate critically the functioning of a system whose stability he desperately wishes to maintain.

CONCLUSION

Lipset's book deserves a new title: it should be called "A-Political Man". The political individual has a want, a goal, and looks for the appropriate means to realize it. Lipset seems dedicated to making sure this does not happen. Individuals are gradually brought into the political system so that their demands will be blunted. Non-voting and passive political participation are considered adequate means to avoid conflict. Multiple group membership is valued because it splits loyalties and dampens major disputes. The authoritarian nature of workers is determined by their family upbringing, not the substance of their political demands. In each case, Lipset recommends that people not be permitted to become 'political beings' actively working toward the fulfillment of their interests. By the logic of his functional democracy, he would sacrifice rational political action because of the uncertainty it invites for the system.

Perhaps nowhere in the book is this complacency toward American society so evident as in the epilogue, 'The End of Ideology?' Here Lipset boldly asserts:

... the fundamental political problems of the industrial revolution have been solved; workers have achieved industrial and political citizenship; the conservatives have accepted the welfare state; and the democratic left has recognized that an increase in overall state power carries with it more dangers to freedom than solutions to economic problems. (p. 443)

specifically, the view that a low income group threatens the existence of democracy. Are all extremist groups comprised of poor people? It seems clear that monarchist, fascist, military, and other right-wing extremists pose at least as great a threat to a democracy. These people are for the most part economically well off. Do revolutions occur in areas of extreme poverty? From the experience of the American, Cuban, Irish, Chinese, French, and Russian revolutions, we know that economic conditions were much worse at different periods in these countries before the specific time the insurgencies began. Think of the Negro revolts in the cities today. Why do they happen in the relatively affluent Northern ghettos and not in the Southern cities or rural areas where many people are close to starvation? Clearly it is a matter of consciousness. When people's expectations rise, they act. They must perceive the hardships around them and they must be aware of the alternatives before they desire change.

Moreover, in many of the countries that Lipset cites as evidence, the great majority of people never had any influence on government policies. The instability of the Latin American governments (which provide over one-third of his cases) has little to do with the actions of the mass of people living in these countries. For the most part, the instability has been caused by battles between different elite groups for political power. Indeed, these conflicts increase with greater economic development, for there are more economic advantages to be gained by staying in political power. In this case, political instability would be increased by economic development. In most Latin American countries the majority of workers and rural peasants remain apathetic spectators, taking only passing interest in the political battles around them. To use these countries as examples of stable or unstable democracies is highly misleading.

For a specific case of economic development and democracy, let's examine the history of Germany in the twentieth century. In the early part of the century Germany was a great industrial power, second only to England. After World War I, the Empire was replaced by the Weimar Republic with a democratic constitution and a multi-party system. Although economic conditions declined, Germany remained a leading industrial nation and a democracy, at least on paper. After

the Nazi takeover in 1933, Germany became more industrially advanced without the slightest hint of democracy. In this case there seems no congruence between economic conditions and democracy. Moreover, to believe that democracy will spring from greater economic development is inaccurate. The Nazi period, which generated the greatest economic wealth, was the most undemocratic.

Finally, the evidence that Lipset presents hides as much as it reveals. Implicit in his ordering of nations is that all have developed somewhat independently of the others. Lipset assumes a kind of free market situation with all nations having an equal chance for industrialization and economic advancement. Just as the United States, England, and other countries have achieved economic maturity and political democracy, it may be expected that the poor nations of the world will soon do likewise. This assumption is unwarranted and misleading. It can be argued that the economic development of the US and the western European nations has gone hand in hand with the economic retardation of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In Latin America, for example, national economies have been made subordinate to the needs of US corporations such as United Fruit. At the same time, US military aid has propped up conservative and reactionary governments that have had little interest in their countries' political development. At least as important as wealth as a factor in promoting democracy is the extent to which a nation enjoys effective self-determination.

DEMOCRACY AND STABILITY

More disturbing than the crude economic determinism is the curious definition of democracy offered. Lipset equates democracy with stability. Groups that wish to change the system produce instability and thus are undemocratic.

Let us examine this closely. At the start of the chapter Lipset gives us a definition of democracy:

... a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials

into the electoral process gradually (though increased organization, and upgrading of the educational system, and a growth in their understanding of the relevance of government action to their interests), increased participation is undoubtedly a good thing for a democracy. (p. 229)

At the heart of Lipset's concern is a fear of the common man. His continual reference to the uneducated mass of people, driven by their insecurities to support authoritarian movements, motivate him to argue against political participation for all. He wishes the gradual approach that will turn the natives into responsible citizens.

Empirically, Lipset's beliefs are open to question. Workers and dispossessed groups are not more intolerant, stupid, or anti-democratic than middle class or upper class people who vote more often. Judging from the turnout rates in Europe (75-90% in most countries, compared to about 63% here), the entrance of the unwashed into politics does not necessarily mean the end of democracy or even pose a constant threat to it. Moreover, the assumption that the vote represents the major sign of political behavior considerably narrows the meaning of citizenship participation in government. Many people who do not vote perform political actions. Strikes, urban riots, and the formation of gun clubs are often acts intended to change policies. In a political system such as the United States, where meaningful alternatives to the prevailing conditions rarely exist at the polls, voting seems a poor way to register political viewpoints. A great many people may be alienated from voting for a very rational reason: it makes no difference which of the candidates wins. In ghetto areas Negro politicians often represent no one but the white power structure. Reasonably enough, the people see little point in voting and are increasingly bringing their demands out on the street.

On the political level, Lipset's fears hardly reconcile with his earlier statement, 'I consider myself a man on the left.' (p. xxi) Rarely does he see a positive role for high level of political participation in a democracy. Perhaps even more

voting is characteristic of economically advanced regions, tending to dispute the earlier claim that economic development fosters moderate democracy. In the discussion of voting turnout rates, virtually omitted is a historical look at voting in the United States. Interestingly enough, although America has become an economically advanced, highly educated, and urbanized society, turnout rates were greater in the 1890s than today. Again, this evidence questions whether democracy, as defined by Lipset, is inherently enhanced by more education and greater economic development.

Underlying the discussion of voting is the question of the degree of participation. Lipset is troubled by this issue, because he realizes that parliamentary democracy needs the fullest participation if it is to remain stable. Yet he is hesitant to state that full participation is a 'good'. His vacillation produces statements like the following: 'Neither high nor low rates of participation and voting are in themselves good or bad for democracy.' (p. 229) Can a bona fide democracy have low rates? In a parliamentary democracy, where the only legitimate participation is through the ballot, what perverse logic makes one view low turnout as neutral for a democracy?

Once again we encounter Lipset's overriding concern with the stability of the political system, rather than the extent of participation. He worries that the entrance of low status, politically unsophisticated people into politics will be 'dysfunctional' for the system. As Lipset states, 'It is only when a major crisis or effective authoritarian movement suddenly pulls the normally disaffected habitual nonvoters into the political arena that the system is threatened.' (p. 229) Democracy is in danger when it is in the hands of the people. Indeed, Lipset sees the possibility of a lower class party taking power as 'an occurrence which would have meant the end of a democracy'. (p. 297) His view of working class authoritarianism and the need for economic stability and high educational levels to underpin a democracy make him fear the entrance of the unwashed into the electorate. Hence this almost Burkean language:

... to the extent that the lower strata have been brought

and social mechanism which permit the largest possible part of the population to influence major decisions by choosing among contenders for political office. (p. 27)

What is emphasized here is competitiveness. Missing is the 'representativeness' aspect which rests at the heart of any concept of democracy. Above all, shouldn't the political leaders reflect the interest and concerns of the people if the system is to be called democratic? In large part the word means the ability of ordinary people to control the decisions that affect their lives.

Lipset has chosen to focus upon the procedures by which choice can be made, but he refuses to deal with the content of the choice. One political scientist has said, 'If the people can choose only from among rascals they are certain to choose a rascal.' In other words, when we talk about democracy it seems necessary to discuss the substantive issues involved, not solely focus upon procedures. Democracy is more than the ability to choose. In Vietnam elections were held, but no candidate could run unless approved by the military. Under Lipset's definition, this is a democracy.

If, at bottom, Lipset's definition of democracy is unduly formalistic, it may be because democracy as an end in itself has little interest for him. Economic development is valued because it produces stability. It eliminates the threat of extremist groups. In addition, it allows for the development of many different social groups that struggle to win the loyalties of the people in the political system. People who are divided into these multiple group memberships develop ties within them. In turn this reduces the intensity of individual demands for change. Loyalties are split among a number of groups, so that no mass organization can overwhelm the existing balance. Above all, major cleavages within the society - religious, class, race, or other - must not be allowed to isolate individuals from the mainstream of the society. People must be integrated into the system if it is to remain stable.

What Lipset seems desperately attempting to avoid is change, or at least change other than gradual adjustment. For him,

democracy is a mechanism for avoiding conflict. The desired end is stability. Instead of becoming a way in which individuals can determine their actions and thus be freer people, democracy is merely the establishment of another form of order. Lipset's concern does not rest with the individual, but rather with performance of the system. The behavior of people matters only to the extent that they present a threat to the stability of the system. Otherwise, as far as Lipset is concerned, 'whatever is, is right.'

At the start of Chapter 3, 'Social Conflict, Legitimacy and Democracy', Lipset more carefully outlines the problems facing a 'functional democracy':

The stability of any given democracy depends not only on the economic development but also on the effectiveness and the legitimacy of its political system. Effectiveness means actual performance, the extent to which the system satisfies the basic functions of government as most of the population and such powerful groups within it as big business or the armed forces see them. Legitimacy involves the capacity of the system to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society. (p. 64)

Let's examine this in some detail. Effectiveness is defined as meeting the needs of the people, plus the interests of the major groups in the society. Isn't it possible that the interests of the two would conflict? Are the interests of the corporations in regard to the air and water pollution that contaminates our urban areas the same as the interests of the people who live in these cities? What about the draft? If most people disapprove of military conscription, does the interest of the military override these objections? Lipset ducks this type of question, declining to accept the possibility that the interests of many of the power holders may contradict the interests of the people. Effectiveness becomes not the capacity of the system to meet the demands of the people, but the ability of the already established system to function without serious disruption or conflict.

by the addition of German big business, a group directly opposed to the interests of the small-town business and farmers who comprised the bulk of Fascist support. Similarly, in Argentina, the Peron government, after the first few years, functioned amicably with domestic and American business interests. An examination of the American radical right indicates that in many groups the leadership is of a higher social background and educational level than the membership. Although appealing to the rank and file by their support for the 'little guy', these organizations acted on behalf of the interests of their more affluent leadership. Whatever the appeals to the social base, these movements were in large part directed from above by some of the more traditional groups. For a valid description of the extremist movements, it is important to consider the leadership, particularly what this group does, not only what it says to attract a social base.

VOTING

In the last two chapters, Lipset has championed the cause of parliamentary democracy against the extremists of the left and right. In doing so he has imposed a considerably narrow view of the individual's reaction to policy-making. Voting for leaders seems the only means by which an individual can have political impact. One of the appeals of 'extremist' groups in this system is that they give individuals some chance to make decisions.

Although Lipset would disagree, the black riots in our urban centers can be considered political acts, by which a people for the first time gain control of their environment. Similarly, wildcat strikes demonstrate the desire of many workers not simply to elect leaders but to act for themselves. Precisely because parliamentary democracy gives little expression to people, it will remain always threatened.

Voting in a parliamentary democracy, of course, is to Lipset a crucial indication of political opinion. In Chapters 6, 7, and 8, Lipset carefully examines the factors influencing voting and non-voting. Much of his evidence is relevant to his previous arguments. On page 242, a table indicates that higher leftist

To brand as authoritarian all who do not specifically lend commitment to the sacred cow of compromise, or do not avow the essential dignity of all positions, is ludicrous. It sacrifices substantive issues for mechanics and, more important, morality for moderation. Again, however, Lipset is concerned with the tidy upkeep of the system. If it remains morally bankrupt, suppressing the desires of individuals within it, that is incidental.

In Chapter 5, 'Fascism: Left, Right and Center', Lipset completes his study of extremist groups. He argues that there are three types of non-Marxist anti-democratic movements (thus fascism?) that draw their support from the traditional social bases of the left, right, and center (working class, upper class, and middle class). In each group Lipset has rehearsed the reasons for working class authoritarianism:

Extremist movements have much in common. They appeal to the disgruntled, the psychologically homeless, the socially isolated, the economically insecure, the uneducated, unsophisticated and authoritarian persons at each level of society. (p. 178)

It is unnecessary to restate the case against Lipset. Much of the criticism of the working class authoritarianism can be applied here. Lipset does not define fascism except to say it threatens the existence of parliamentary democracy. Since he rarely discusses the political mainstream, we are at a loss to discover to what degree these groups are extremist and on what issues they differ from non-extremist ones.

Furthermore, Lipset maintains that the programs of the left, right, and center varieties remain different because they reflect a distinct social base. Clearly the rhetoric designed to appeal to the social bases of the three groups is different. Yet it is necessary to examine the leadership of these movements before making specific judgments. In attempting to correlate social base with programs of the mass movements, Lipset has ignored, except in passing (p. 178), the curious similarities in group leadership that existed in many of the fascist movements. For instance, the Nazi movement was considerably strengthened

In this view of democracy, legitimacy is a critical term. For Lipset, crises of legitimacy develop when major traditional institutions are in doubt, or - more important for our purposes - when all groups do not have access to the political system. The political system 'handles' the entering groups by assimilation and integration of their needs with those of the society. This process is a gradual one that stresses the acceptance by the new groups of the dominant values of the society. Isolation of the new groups from the mainstream of the society should be avoided at all costs. It is necessary to develop loyalties within the system so the members of the new group will see their demands 'staked' upon the functioning of the system.

Lipset assumes the needs of people can be alleviated or compromised by making them develop ties within the society. It is necessary to eliminate the frustration and social isolation which would motivate individuals to voice their demands in an uncompromising manner. Lipset neglects the possibility that people may believe something so strongly that no amount of social integration or cross pressure will dispell their desires. Continually in Political Man all demands of a group are reduced into questions of how they will affect the system, whether they will lead to greater disruption, not whether the demands are justified and should be granted even if it means overturning the system. Lipset's idea is, not that all individuals have the right to determine their goals, but that only those who will not disrupt can participate.

Until now, we have been dealing with Political Man, attempting to indicate its questionable assumptions. The arguments of Political Man, however, have implications for decision-making in the real world. It is precisely these assumptions that underlie many of the actions of American foreign policy makers. If we assume that democracy and stability can only rest upon a well-functioning economic base, that all attempts must be made to keep a system stable until it can reach a level of high economic growth, and finally that no groups in the society should attempt to disrupt the present status quo from developing the economic requisites of a democracy, then our behavior to the Third World nations and even to the problems at home will be surprisingly predictable. In the Third

World our desire to foster some sort of domestic stability that will allow the development of a substantial economic base leads us to fight all attempts by indigenous groups to challenge the structure on which the base is to be built. This is the heart of our counter-insurgency policy. It motivates us to fight in Vietnam, invade the Dominican Republic, and continually prepare for the next outbreak to occur. It leads us to ignore the aspirations of many people in the Third World for a better life now.

Similarly, if black ghettos erupt, if workers wildcat, or even if students fight for more decision-making power in the university, the problems are placed in terms of communications breakdown. Substantive demands are ignored, and disruption of the system over its failure to deal with those demands is denounced as illegitimate. Again, the concern is with the health of a reified 'system', not the individuals living in it. They are expendable, but the smooth functioning of the system must never be questioned.

DEMOCRACY AND THE UNWASHED MASSES

Lipset's view of the working class fits nicely into his framework of functional democracy. Essentially he argues that 'the lower class way of life produces individuals with rigid and intolerant approaches to politics.' (p. 89) The lack of education, isolation from the media and social groups, the economic insecurity and tensions of working class life make the average worker less willing to support democratic values, and less capable of ethnic and religious tolerance, than his middle class counterpart.

For Lipset, the authoritarian worker is the classic example of the new group to be brought gradually into the political system. His social isolation and economic insecurities must be overcome before true citizenship should be extended. While over the long run in the western industrial countries we can anticipate that workers will be less authoritarian, it is important to remain wary of their active participation in the political process.

The Lipset argument, since it struck at the core of most so-

cialist and democratic thinking, has received considerable scrutiny. Both empirical and methodological criticism has been lodged against his findings. The F-scale,* the basis for much of Lipset's claim of the authoritarian nature of workers, has been invalidated. If education is controlled in both working class and middle class groups, the workers tend to be more tolerant than the middle class on most issues. Even without controlling for education levels, workers have been found to be more tolerant on many basic issues such as having Jews and Negroes living next door, than the middle class. Finally, in specific elections, workers have tended to give less support than the middle class to authoritarian electoral alternatives (McCarthy in 1952, Goldwater in 1964, Wallace's primary campaign in 1964). Basically, these findings point to a view that neither the middle class nor the working class is inherently authoritarian, and that both are influenced by authoritarian and anti-authoritarian factors.

Yet ignoring the empirical evidence against Lipset, we see some fundamental errors in the use of the term extremism. For Lipset, extremist movements are those that upset the established conditions. Since workers see it in their interest to change the status quo, whether it be for better working conditions or more wages, it seems natural that they will possess an 'extremist' orientation. It is hard to imagine that a worker on the automobile production line believes it is legitimate for GM to make billions in profit without redistributing some of this in better wages to the rank and file. From his position it is rational to support actions that change the existing corporate structure. Similarly, workers do not support the French Communist Party, for example, because they are 'drawn' to its authoritarian posture, but because they feel it represents their interests.

* The F-scale is a set of questions asked of survey respondents in order to reveal the degree of 'authoritarian-ness' of the individual. Originally developed to isolate potential supporters of fascism, it has been extremely difficult to utilize in isolating communists or other left-wing 'extremists'.